

[Mamie Brown, Librarian]

Approximately 2100 words

SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

Life History

TITLE MAMIE BROWN, LIBRARIAN

Date of First Writing January 11th, 1939

Name of Person Interviewed Madaline Allan (colored)

Fictitious Name Mamie Brown

Street Address 4 Norman Street

Place Charleston, S.C.

Occupation School Teacher

Name of Writer Muriel A. Mann

Name of Reviser Office Charleston C. 10. S. C. Box.2.

Project 1655

Muriel A. Mann,

Charleston, S.C.

No. of words 2100

LIFE HISTORY MAMIE BROWN, LIBRARIAN

It was a bright sunny morning out of doors. The city was basking in a warm mid-winter sun, but inside the little brown house on Robson Street there was gloom and despair. It was the home of Mamie Brown, and Mamie had lost her job.

You would never guess, judging from her appearance, that she is a woman of considerable talent and education, a capable school teacher, librarian, seamstress and mother. But she is all of these, and more.

Mamie is taller than the average woman and inclined to plumpness. She has thick lips, a broad nose, coffee colored skin and straight, wiry hair - a true negro type. She dresses neatly and in good taste.

Mamie was born on Smith Street forty years ago. Her father was a brickmason and her mother was a seamstress. They had worked and saved, and in 1903, when Mamie was four years old, they were able to buy the home on Robson Street in which they still live and which they share with the widowed Mamie and her two daughters. It is a two-storied frame house painted brown, and is the most substantial one on the street - a short throughfare off the highway near the edge of the city.

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There are no trees or flower gardens on this unpaved street that borders the section of the city known as Fiddlers Green, a section which ends in the marshes of the Ashley River nearby. The square plot by the side of the house, which might have been a garden, is paved with cement. A roof has been erected over it to provide shelter for an automobile. This was during better times. In true Southern style broad porches follow the L shape of the house, the lower floor of which is occupied by Mamie, while her parents live on the upper story.

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Mamie's father, Samuel, was seventy years old on Thanksgiving Day. He is slight and erect and wears his years lightly. He is still able to do an occasional days work. His wife, Henrietta, has long since given up sewing. Their chief concern is the welfare of Mamie and her family, and keeping the taxes paid on the home, now that Mamie is no longer able to pay any rent.

When Mamie was a child she attended the public schools, Simonton and Burke, respectively, and completed the fifth grade. She went from there to the Avery Institute, a junior college, where she finished the normal Course. After receiving her diploma she obtained a position teaching school. She gave up teaching when she got married. That was in 1924. Her husband, William, had a good position 3 as assistant cashier at the Mutual Bank and was able to provide for his wife. After they were married they continued to live in her parents parents' home.

The family circle was complete when Mamie became the mother of two daughters, born five years apart. It was a united and happy little group. They were able to study and enjoy the things they liked best; radio programs, and reading. Mamie loved to do fine hand work in her spare time, especially in the evenings, with her family grouped about her. She and her husband read the classics, Dickens, Scott, Thackeray, while her nimble fingers worked swiftly on delicate fabrics or crocheted many useful articles. Samples of Mamie's afghans, bedspreads and hemstitching have been shown on many occasions, and her work was in great demand for church bazaars at one time. Their lives seemed to be quite complete. They were, above the average intellectually, and they were very ambitious for their daughters.

The rooms occupied by Mamie are quite comfortably furnished, with rugs, curtains and furniture of better taste than is usual in the homes of the colored people. There is a piano in the parlor, a radio in the dining-room, and the apartment is hosted by a large circulating oil-burning heater. There are built-in bookcases filled with books, many books. One of these in the dining-room 4 contains a complete set of Funk and Wagnall's Standard

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Encyclopedia. A goldfish bowl stands in the corner near a window, filled with minute tropical fish. The house is lighted with electricity and equipped with modern plumbing. Everything looks well cared for.

But this kind of life was destined to end. Four years ago, in 1935, Mamie's husband, William, died of Bright's Disease, following a lingering illness, and Mamie had to readjust her life to the new circumstances. At the time, Ethel, the older daughter, was eight years old, and her sister Viola, was three. Since then it has been rough traveling for Mamie and her aging parents.

The first thing that Mamie did after realizing that it would be necessary for her to support her family, was to have her teacher's certificate renewed. She applied for a position in one of the city schools, but unfortunately, in such a crowded field her chances were not so good, and Mamie was unable to find a place.

It was discouraging, but she kept on trying, without results. Then she applied to the W P A and was fortunate enough, after being certified for relief, to be given work in a library in one of the largest colored schools in the city. Nothing could have suited her better, for it gave her an opportunity to use her imagination, and she did outstanding work.

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It was not long before Mamie made the library live because of the intense interest which she took in her work. Her posters were artistic and unusually interesting, and her book reviews were worded in excellent English, showing real thought and much research. While there were a great many books in the library of this school, they had never been organized or classified, and it was entirely through Mamie's hard work that the library became an outstanding unit of the school.

Mamie held story-telling hours and soon the children were flocking to the library to hear her stories, for Mamie had the knack of making her characters live. And more and more

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the library was used for research work, for the pupils soon found out that she was a storehouse of information, and never failed to give whatever help was needed.

It was only natural that soon, she was raised from the intermediate to the skilled rating, and the school board promised that, when the WPA program ended, Mamie would continue to be employed by the institution.

The outlook was bright indeed, and Mamie was very happy and contented in her work. Ethel and Viola, now twelve and seven years of age, respectively, were doing well in school. Ethel was finishing the eight grade and had been on the honor roll every month. She was planning, 6 definitely, to become one of three things, a nurse, a pharmacist or a doctor, but her desire to become a doctor was strongest. With careful planning it was possible, on Mamie's pay to make ends meet and to even pay her parents rent to help out with the taxes. Mamie was planning for the future.

Mamie was not prepared for the blow when it fell. Without warning, she was released from the WPA, and her beloved library work was over. A new ruling was made releasing all women over sixty-five years of age, or with children under sixteen years of age, from the WPA rolls. These women were eligible for Social Security benefits.

Mamie's case was investigated after she had made her application for the benefits, but she was notified, that, as she was a healthy woman able to work, she was not entitled to Social Security. In any case, the state was not prepared to take on this extra burden, she was told. So Mamie's spirits were very low. There was some consolation in a letter received from the Welfare Department stating that they were going to reinvestigate her case, but meanwhile something had to be done, for Mamie had not been able to save anything, and it was imperative that she find work immediately.

Again, faced with the problem of providing for her family, she renewed her efforts to get a teacher's position, and did succeed in finding a small job teaching, arts and 7 crafts from 3:30 until 7 o'clock every afternoon in one of the schools. But the pay was so small that

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she was unable to provide sufficient food for herself and the children, much less help her father with the taxes, as she had been doing.

Perhaps the most difficult thing for Mamie to understand was that another library worker was put in her place by the WPA, thus killing her chance of being taken on by the school board. As long as they could get a librarian paid by the government, they would not employ anyone. The thought of another carrying on the work which she had begun was hard to bear.

It was with tears in her eyes that Mamie told of her fear that her children were getting an “inferiority complex” because of the conditions under which they now have to live. And she believes this too. The strain is telling on her visably.

Fortunately the health of the family has been good, but it is not possible to have a balanced diet, heat in the house, or clothing on the fifty cents a day that Mamie is now earning. She cannot even buy the materials necessary to complete some of her partly finished handwork and crochet pieces, she hopes to sell. And she is disheartened by the knowledge that, when the schools close at the end of the summer term, her pay will cease.

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There is very little that the children can do to assist. Every Sunday, Ethel, the older daughter, earns twenty fives cents for playing the hymns at the Sunday School, but she is still too young to earn enough to really help, and Mamie has begun to believe that her chances to study to become either a nurse, a pharmacist or a doctor are very slim. Viola has not made any plans for the future as she in only in the second grade in school. She is too young to realize what has happened, and she does not know why her mother weeps so much and is so filled with sorrow.

But there is a bright side to Mamie's trouble. If she can hold on a while longer, she may be given a permanent position teaching again in one of the public schools, she believes.

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She is still trying to find the solution to her problems and live up to her ideas of a good life," to be an active member of the church and of some service to the community, she says: I want to have a family life that will be an example to others".